EXPLORING A LEGEND—JESTER CAVE

How does one go about exploring a legend? Think of how many well-known caves with many miles of passage exist in vague locations, eluding the poor modern-day speleologist and every-day spelunker. Well, here is one such "critter" that some of the Central Oklahoma Grotto managed to lasso onto. But it wasn't easy-------.

Gene Martin managed, after several years, to pinpoint the location of the legendary Jester cave. We began our little episode by calling out a mapping team in April of 1968. The details of the week-end are generally not worthy of recording, but were never-the-less very humorous. Imagine, five children under twelve, two nagging wives and bone chilling water up to waist deep (in places) while mapping the initial 2470 feet. The silence of the netherworld was never so shattered!

We surfaced (like a submarine) and dried out, changing clothes with much childish confusion. Being well disciplined cavers we men sneaked off leaving the trivial details of packing our gear and redressing five children to the women. We sneaked back into the cave to take a look at the oft-mentioned Jester mine. It is a horizontal shaft dug at a right angle to the cave, only about thirty feet from the main entrance. I'd like to inject this one thought on the mine. It was either dug by a troll or a very small miner. It does have track laid down over ties, and must have required a lot of hard, cramped work.

We failed to impress the rest of our grotto with our misfortune in locating Jester and were further hampered with a real trogloBITE, on Gene's hand, received during the mapping of the watery subway-like tunnel. With his hand a nasty color and swollen, disinterest fell over our project like a shroud. So we staved off mapping the cave until the Thanksgiving week-end, filling our time with other projects.

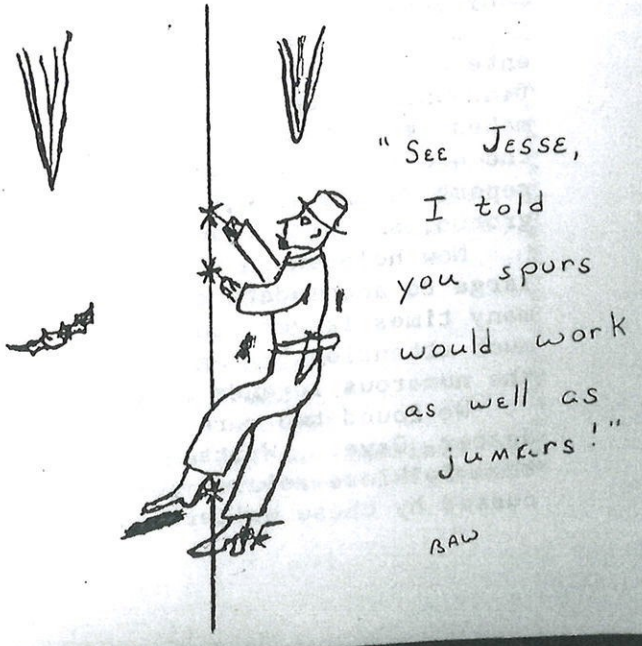
In September, a young lady who attends our church, brought up the fact that her husband would like to do some caving; during a casual conversation. A meeting was arranged. We met, did some talking, and set up a caving trip. Would you care to venture a guess where? Uh-huh, Jester cave again.

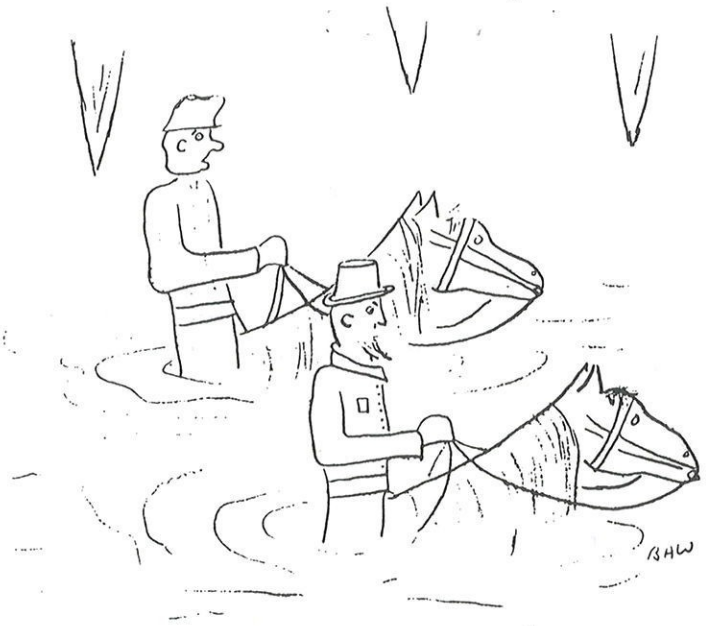
The very remoteness of Jester from the other known gypsum caves in Oklahoma, the singular bareness of it's unadorned passageways, as well as the aspect of exploring beyond our 2470 feet of mapped passage, along with the healthy watery novice appeal drew us to it like a steel pin to a magnet. So we spent another 8½ hours of fun filled caving on a September Saturday.

Telling Gene all about our trip with the novice, and recalling the vast distances traveled and the finding of four rooms beyond the point where the April trip ended acted as a catalyst. After urging, and begging for others in the grotto to assist we planned our second mapping trip. Other projects and lack of interest kept the party down to three of us, Gene and Ronnie Martin and Martin Collins.

It was the week-end after Thanksgiving. Cold grey clouds swept across the morning sky as we hurriedly drove to the cave. We mapped for four hours and came out to find a heavy snow falling. We decided to head for home. Our clothes were soaking wet, and in a freezing snowstorm that is (b-rr-rr) most uncomfortable when looking for your mislaid car.

The third mapping trip was a little better, as we had a group of five. We all carried in our noon meal, and were prepared to do some real mapping. We moved fast, still mapping only the main passage. Our footage, when totalled, added over 4000 feet to the first 4000 or so feet we had mapped on the first two trips. Therefore, we felt we had enough footage to merit the respect, (belated) of our own grotto. Mind you, we





"ONE MORE CAVE JESSE, AND I'LL QUIT!

haven't completed mapping the main passage, and have two major side passages and many crawlways yet to check out and map.

The main passage of Jester does not seem to follow any logical course. The stream passage often disappears under a low ledge of rock and comes back in unexpectedly further down the passage. The ceiling often exceeds eight feet, and just as often dips to three and four feet. In most sections passage width exceeds fourteen feet. There are eight known entrances and the distance between them rarely exceeds 2000 feet. All of the deep water encountered thus far in the cave is in the first half mile, and can be easily by-passed. As we have noted in other gypsum caves, the temperature varies in different sections of the cave. On one day, using a Kodak thermometer with verified accuracy we got readings of 64°F., in one area, 56°F., in most sections, and one 52°F.

We next launched a prolonged assault on the legends of Jester. All of us were interested in the mine, in relation to this cave. We called the Bureau of Mines for information. Seems like this department was set up in 1932, and had no records at all of mining in that area, but as earlier reports had never been properly indexed, it might have been overlooked. Copper and silver, as well as gold, have been noted in that area. By the phrase "that area" we felt the lady meant "part of Oklahoma, south of Kansas, and east of New Mexico, including part of Texas".

Although I am not satisfied that the article is actually on Jester Cave, the editor of OKLAHOMA UNDERGROUND supplied us with copies of a 1931 newspaper article that does give a cave location similar to our subject and I think the story is interesting in several aspects. The author is naive as to caving and caves in general, and seems to use the phrase "this explorer" with such obvious pride as to make one chuckle occasionally. Rather than reprinting the entire story only a few items from the article have been quoted, as follows:

"---and can be explored through 11 connecting channels running back a distance of 10 miles." Or how about this one? "Owing to the many dates and initials out on its gypsum walls, this explorer is assured that its location has been known for many years." This was in 1931!

Here is one quote that made us laugh aloud: "Jogging (running?) to the east one enters larger rooms with higher ceilings. Take another right angled turn and you find another opening leading to the west. Here, one meets a marsh gas (?) which makes it dangerous to proceed---etc." Also out of this informative narrative comes the quote: "a peculiar species of lizard about 12 inches long" which may be an early report on the sighting of a tiger salamander, an amphibian of great interest to our grotto, and well known to Oklahoma's gypsum cavers.

Now hold on to your hats! The article ends thusly: "This cave is sufficiently large to accomodate 8,000 to 10,000 persons at the same time----------this cavern is many times larger than the caverns of Virginia and Kentucky which have attracted so much attention." And there you have it -- without even mentioning his accounts of the numerous legends of the cave. He was an imaginative reporter to say the least.

We found two more newspaper stories dated June and September of 1964 relating to Jester Cave. Written in a vague and un-caver like manner they gave us little more than folklore related to the cave, and its approximate location. The mine was discussed by these writers as though it were part of the cave. In spite of ourself we

have absorbed some of this legend. In general, the stories hold that veins of gold in the rocks were found by Indians, or that seven burro loads of gold were hidden in the passages by Mexican soldiers hiding from either Indians or Texans, that outlaws used it for a hideout, etc., (Jessie James is, of course, mentioned). There is also the story that Spaniards found gold in a side passage, and mined it for thirty three years.

Jester Cave is located in Greer county of southwest Oklahoma. Once Greer county was a rugged, brawling territory, inhabited by Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, Texans and outlaws. It was even the scene of an early day gold rush. The area may have been a part of Spanish possessions in the new world as only fifty miles south of here old gold mine smelter operations have been verified by the finding of 17th century ruins of the Spanish dominion.

Old Greer county was part of Texas after the war between Texas and Mexico, for Texas independence. During the 1890's a gold rush hit the area, and prior to 1907 when Oklahoma became a state, many an outlaw found safe haven and good pickin's in the wild and woolly boom towns of Greer county. Natives of this area are mostly a conservative lot and reluctant to cast any shadow on their forebearers. Much of the color and violence of the historical background of this western frontier lies buried unheralded and unknown.

An 1895 newspaper account mentions a Mexican fort which was supposed to have been located north of the cave. If the old fort did exist, then the route between it and the one known to have existed to the south would have passed near enough to the cave to merit giving a little credence to some of the tales.

A recent article in the SAYRE HERALD (1967) tells of a Hugh Plumlee discovering the markers of a 1910 gold claim on his property. This was just ten miles north of the cave. Since Oklahoma had a real gold rush, (which proved to be far more rush than gold) in the 1890's, and proof exists that the Spanish mined gold just south of Jester, one hesitates to ignore the legends of gold in the cave.

Looking critically at the tales concerning Jessie James or some outlaw using the cave; it seems like a bad place due to the large amount of water in the cave, being a damp hideout to say the least. The mountains to the east of here are far easier to reach and much better for defense. Yet from Indiana to Texas, from New Mexico to Kentucky, we hear about poor old Jessie hiding in some cave.

If early day explorers, such as the Spanish had found gold it seems certain that ruins of a town or fort would remain as evidence of the fact, since many ruins have been uncovered farther south. If Indians had found gold in the seams of the rock it would probably have remained there, since most Indians were superstitious about caves, and had very little idea of the value of gold. No signs remain of anything having been pried out of the seams, and heaven knows, we looked.

How about the mine? Why is there a mine there? Who dug it and why? What did this mysterious miner of the 1940's seek and why? If we can't find the answers to these questions for our next issue, or the entire ten miles of cave rumored to be present, we will at least, have a completed map with some boring technical data put in to complete the second installment of "Exploring A Legend".

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